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Rewriting *HerStory*: Aboriginal Women reclaim education as a tool for personal and community, health and well-being

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Abstract

Education has long been recognized as the key to increased self-esteem, socio-economic status, and financial independence. However, historically in Canada, education has also been an institution associated with pain and suffering for many Aboriginal people, their families, and their communities (Stonechild, 2006). Frequently this suffering contributed to the propagation of a variety of forms of abuse—often impacting the family and community in negative and harmful ways (INAC, 1996a). Far too frequently these abusive behaviours became cyclical—repeating through the generations. Lowered self-esteem, lack of confidence and sense of worth often translated to dismal educational and career successes; leading to a life fraught with poverty, addictions, disease, and young mortality (INAC, 1996b). The purpose of this study was to examine the role that education could play in the lives of Aboriginal women, as it has been acknowledged that women hold the reins for the well-being of the family and the community (Julien, Zinni, & Wright, 2009). Further, to examine what the experience of education has been in these women's lives to better understand the role that counsellors/psychologists, educators, and other helping professionals can have to encourage retention and completion of educational pursuits. The study employed a qualitative method called: Aboriginal Research (Kenny, 2000) where research is conducted by a series of rituals and in the form of story sharing. Nine women shared their stories of how they navigated the demands of academia to overcome the barriers of previous abuse, racism, poverty, and hopelessness to experience mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. They identified the main catalyst for returning to school as a desire to create a better life for their children and contribute to the well-being of their community. These women reclaimed education as a tool for healing and strength; a model which could offer hope to other marginalized populations. Further this study identified a number of ways that helping professionals can contribute to this process.

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1. Introduction

For the purposes of this article, the words *Aboriginal*, *First Nations*, and *Native* are used interchangeably to refer to the collective of Canada's original peoples.

This study focused on the educational and career development experiences of nine First Nations women in an effort to address the question: *How do experiences of education influence career development for First Nations women?* It employed the philosophies of oral history tradition, feminist research practices, and those of a relatively

new research practice called *Aboriginal Research* (Kenny, 2000). The project was designed using Kenny's (2000) model to study collaboratively with this group of women, who are each pursuing a better life through college education. The hope was to gain greater understanding of the experience of education in these women's lives—what assisted them, what hindered them, and what aspirations they had for the future. Of particular interest was how the experience of education might be tied to career development practices in a culturally appropriate way. It was hoped that having a better understanding of these factors might assist other Aboriginal women who might be considering a return to school of their own, as well as educators and counsellors who are in positions to assist future students. Therefore, the intent of this study was to gain insight into the educational experiences of the women, as well as their perception of the connections between education, future employment, and personal health and wellbeing.

2. First Nations People in Canada

Canada prides itself on the celebration of the diversity of cultures that can be found within her borders. A number of cultural groups have sought refuge in Canada specifically because of this celebration and the opportunities to maintain their own cultural practices and language, as well as experience the rich diversity of other cultures. Although Canada recognizes two official cultural groups and their corresponding languages—English and French—it is the Aboriginal people who are commonly recognized as the original settlers (Blue, Darou, & Ruano, 2010). This recognition is decreed in numerous treaties and official government status accorded by the Indian Act (Indian & Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 2011a). Despite this acknowledgement, the history of Canada's Aboriginal people has been fraught with numerous challenges.

Early in Canada's development as a nation, oppressive policies were passed that were aimed at assimilating the Aboriginal people into mainstream society (Frank, 1997). These policies included passing laws that made the use of traditional language and practices illegal; the implementation of the reserve system and massive removal from traditional lands; the ill-fated residential school system; and wide sweeping child welfare laws which resulted in excessive numbers of children forcefully taken from their homes, to be placed in foster homes or the often church run, residential schools, far from their families and communities (Robertson, 2006). The effect of these policies caused enormous pain and suffering—disconnects between culture, language, and traditions—that many feel will take generations to overcome (McCormick, 2000; Ponting, 1997; Richardson & Nelson, 2007).

To better understand the impact of these policies, in 1991, the government of Canada struck its largest official inquiry of any kind, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], and initiated the *Aboriginal Peoples Survey*. As part of the survey, massive numbers of both public and private hearings were held across the nation, which took several years to complete and over 4000 pages to document (INAC, 1996a). RCAP offered 440 recommendations for governmental change to address the impact of the earlier policies—including an immediate need to repair the residual damage of residential schools by promoting the importance of education offered in more culturally appropriate and respectful ways. Programs were created, educators were sought, and the push began to reclaim education as a tool for learning, growth, and success (Stonechild, 2006). To demonstrate the government's commitment for reparation and remediation, an official apology was offered and a renewed commitment was made to follow through with the many educational and healing initiatives (INAC, 2011b).

Today Aboriginal people are one of Canada's fastest growing populations. According to the 2006 Census data, Aboriginal people in Canada have surpassed the one million population mark (Statistics Canada, 2008). This represents 3.8 percent of the Canadian population, and documents an increased growth of 45 percent when compared to data available from the 1996 census. This corresponds with a much smaller increase of only 8 percent for non-Aboriginal Canadians when compared to the same Census data. Aboriginal women constituted 52 percent of this growth and the median age for Aboriginals was 24.7 years old versus 37.7 years of age for the remainder of Canadians. Astoundingly, more than 50 percent of all Aboriginal people are under the age of 24, with the largest concentration being under 14 years (Statistics Canada, 2008). This means that the majority of Aboriginal people are of school age, yet Aboriginal people have the highest rates of school dropout in the nation; and of those who do complete high-school, only a small percentage go onto postsecondary education (Bezanson et al., 2007).

With these statistics and the push from the federal government in mind, the need to understand how to provide culturally infused educational and career development programs is paramount. This requires counsellors, educators,

government officials, and potential employers to have a better understanding of the unique traditions, practices, and beliefs of this population. Providing competent, ethical counselling across cultures necessitates specialized awareness, skills, and knowledge of the cultural influences of the client group involved (Pettifor, 2010), yet the dearth of information specific to this population is critical. This study was designed to address this need.

3. Current Study

This study focused on addressing the educational and career development needs of Aboriginal women, as it is commonly believed that the women are the keepers of the culture and have the greatest influence on the family (Julien, et al., 2009). The logic was to study with a group of Aboriginal women who had successfully returned to school so that counsellors, educators, and other invested stakeholders could benefit by the wisdom they shared. The choice was made to conduct the study within the institution that I worked, with students and programs that were known to me. This allowed me to capitalize on the relationships and intimate working knowledge I had with the services and programs available to the women, as well as the environment that the women were immersed in. Women self-selected to participate by responding to a poster—no attempt to recruit was made, although I was known to all participants. Nine women responded within the first day and although additional women came forward, the decision to limit participation to the original nine was made. The degree of interest in discussing these topics was not lost, as they were often raised within the *Aboriginal Women's Sharing Circle* on campus, which I was a welcomed guest. Having the privilege of participating in this group assisted me to continue to raise my awareness, knowledge, and skills in working with Aboriginal people, as required for ethical research and practice. It also served as a cultural guide of sorts—a necessity when researching across cultures (Offet-Gartner, 2010).

To approach the study in a culturally appropriate manner, Kenny's (2000) Aboriginal Research model was used, which utilizes a series of rituals, or protocols, that the researcher must partake in. The model reflects many of the holistic traditions, values, and beliefs commonly found amongst most Aboriginal groups—the importance of relationships, interconnectedness, balance, inclusion of Elders, storytelling, and modeling. The research process focuses on hearing and creating a story, with context, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends that change and grow with each telling. Kenny admitted that these ideas are not unique to her, but have evolved as a result of the teachings of generations of many Aboriginal people who used the traditions of oral history and storytelling.

When using this model, Kenny (2000) suggested that the researcher should always be “flying above” these rituals. She utilized the metaphor of a raven, flying high in the air; keeping a watch on the surface below; adjusting the flight pattern to circle—high, low, back, and forth—all the while searching for new information. Kenny likened the process of research to that of the raven's way of knowing, realizing that there needs to be movement back and forth between each task and ritual; each time looking and organizing the information differently in response to the changing “view”—each view deepening the story that evolves—recognizing that the view is but a glimpse.

4. Discussion of the Literature as Compared to the Findings

The intent of this study was to better understand the educational and career needs of First Nations women in the hopes that this knowledge would shed light on how counsellors and educators might assist in increasing educational attainment in this population. This section will provide a discussion between what was found in existing literature to inform this process and what arose from the women's stories that offered the wisdom of experience and salience.

An extensive review of literature was undertaken to assist in this process—drawing from a wide variety of disciplines. It can be concluded that positive and effective helping strategies appear to be those that recognize the socio-political, historical, and cultural factors that directly affect the lives of Aboriginal women (McCloskey & Mintz, 2006). Being prepared for, and open to, discussing of the impact of historical trauma, cultural differences, and privilege is essential to the success of any intervention planned with Aboriginal women (Shepard, O'Neill, Guenette, 2006). Several of these factors were raised during this study. All of these women spoke of the historical and cultural influences and the impact they had in their lives and experiences of education. Often, these were interwoven with the parental and familial themes—the two most consistent and prevalent themes—present in each of the nine interviews and played significant roles in the lives and experiences of these women. Socio-economic-political inferences were embedded throughout their stories and permeated the themes of residential schools,

funding, racism, abuse, and the words of wisdom. The predominance with which such factors surfaced demonstrates agreement between the women's experiences and the suggestions made in the literature.

Personal traits and a willingness to examine one's own cultural biases and beliefs play a significant role in the ability to work effectively with this population (McCloskey & Mintz, 2006; Malone, 2000). This was evident both in the literature reviewed and from the experiences the women shared. Being prepared to extend efforts beyond what is often found in typical counselling and teaching domains appears to be appreciated and effective—many of the women referred to this as *stepping outside of the box* and often it was this trait that made the most significant difference for them. Similarly, participating in cultural and community events is connected with an increase in awareness and acceptance—messages that the women spoke of appreciating. Knowledge of cultural values, beliefs, and traditions, as well as the willingness to foster mutually respectful relationships, were identified as being optimal (Marshall, 2002; Shepard et al., 2006). Moreover, the ability to be flexible, culturally inclusive, and cognizant of the significant role of family and community in most decisions will increase the likelihood of effectiveness with this population (Blue et al., 2010). The predominance of the importance of family for the women of this study, confirm that these factors are imperative when considering educational and career aspirations of Aboriginal women. Integrating some of these suggestions into the counselling relationship will be a positive affirmation of Arthur and Collins (2010) vision of a shift towards more culturally inclusive practices and will assist counsellors in becoming more culturally competent (Pettifor, 2010) to meet the needs of Aboriginal women. Incorporating the same suggestions into planned research projects, such has been done in this project, will further assist researchers to approach studies in culturally appropriate and competent ways as well (Kenny, 2000; Offet-Gartner, 2010).

Similarly, inclusion of the aforementioned suggestions into academic planning and delivery would also have merit (Battiste, 1998; Youngblood-Henderson, 2000). Richardson and Blanchet-Cohen (2000) reminded us that “the history of postsecondary education for Aboriginal peoples in Canada is recent” (p. 169). They also pointed out that successful completion of postsecondary programs has steadily risen in the past decade. Current census data supports this claim, showing continued growth in this area, although still lagging behind that of non-Aboriginals (Statistics Canada, 2008). It is believed that these improvements can be attributed to a number of factors, including increased funding and community control of educational programs, thereby including family and community in the process; updated and culturally infused curriculum; and an emphasis on practical applications of learning through practica, apprenticeships, and cooperative work terms—highlighting the importance of remaining flexible and relationally orientated (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). These suggestions seem to align with the women's experiences.

Each of the women in this study received funding assistance for their education—four from their bands, four from other Aboriginal funding initiatives, and one from government student loans and scholarship programs. All recognized that they would not have been able to attend school without the funding they received, so funding played a significant role in the educational pursuits for all of these women. However, concern regarding stable funding arose in some of the literature reviewed (Stonechild, 2006) and was raised by each of the women. For some of them, funding was such a barrier that it delayed their decision to return to school significantly. For others, funding amounts were not reflective of the costs of the educational institution or living costs of the city, forcing some women to have to interrupt their studies to find a means of supporting their family. For a third group, previous unsuccessful attempts at returning to school, exhausted much of the funding available for them, making it impossible for them to receive funding throughout this educational pursuit. Each woman identified inadequate planning, the lack of necessary prerequisite preparation, and the lack of family support as reasons for these failed attempts. This conundrum emphasizes the importance of early career and educational planning and perhaps even suggests linking this planning to funding approval to assist women to capitalize on the limited funding available.

The women also spoke of other, more personal and by far, more damaging reasons that precipitated their early departure from school. These included stories of abuse, racism, gender disparity, poverty, increased family responsibilities, and the strain of single parenting. These issues are well recognized in the literature as impairments that can significantly reduce educational and career opportunities for women (Betz, 2006; Fouad, Helledy, & Metz, 2003; Shepard et al., 2006). Perhaps the greatest damage that results from these oppressions is the resulting feelings of reduced self-esteem, unworthiness, and disempowerment. Certainly, this was true for the women of this study. Each of them spoke of how challenging it was for them to overcome the negative experiences of their past and the positive role that this educational experience and the supports offered therein, was having. They emphasized their determination to become economically independent through achieving their educational and career goals as a means of protecting them and their children from becoming victims in the future. Each of these proclamations serves as a

declaration and reclaiming of *Her-story* of education—as a tool for the future, as opposed to a weapon of the past. This suggests that programs that address the prevention of family violence, racism, gender disparity, and assist with family responsibilities may lend support in the future educational and career development plans of Aboriginal women (McCloskey & Mintz, 2006).

This study agreed with the literature reviewed that the lack of appropriate educational and career role models, as well as limited access to academic and career information, all contribute to reduced involvement in pursuing advanced educational and career development programs (Julien et al. 2009; Stonechild, 2006). It is clear that these barriers need to be reduced; however this requires a concerted effort by a number of committed individuals and agencies. This sentiment was shared by many of the women in this study, believing that this begins by assisting them to gain higher educational attainment. Several of the participants suggested that when you help the women, everyone receives help, as women are the caretakers of the family and the community. One of the women said that “helping the women get educated creates an upsurge of educated people—as children tend to do what their mothers do”—so the positive influence of one woman can be said to have a corresponding rippled effect. By committing to school, each of these women served as a role model for their own children, as well as for other Aboriginal children and people they were in contact with. In addition, all were committed to returning to their home communities following their own academic and career achievement, becoming a role model and mentor, thus increasing the magnitude of the positive ripple effect of educational attainment. According to the literature and the findings of this study, commitments such as these *will* have a positive impact—in wholistic ways—for all involved.

Providing positive role models *and* focusing on helping First Nations women attain higher levels of education would have the spin-off effect of increased self-esteem, sense of accomplishment, and increased career and occupational exposure for themselves, as well as other members of their families and communities (Betz, 2006). Greater career options typically provide greater opportunities, reducing the likelihood of unemployment, and leading to greater economic independence (Benzanson et al., 2007). This, in turn, continues the ripple of increased self-esteem and efficacy, as well as the willingness to mentor and encourage others, not to mention providing positive role models for the general population, where negative stereotypes abound (McCloskey & Mintz, 2006). Having to face these negative stereotypes was mentioned by several of the women, as was the lack mentors and role models. The importance of such individuals, and the implementation of earlier career planning, cannot be overlooked and has been affirmed in this study and in numerous scholarly reviews (Fouad, et al., 2003; Marshall, 2002; Peavey, 1998).

The influence of family for the women of this study was prevalent. The desire to ensure their children have a better life was the main motivation for returning to school and staying committed to a career path for all of the parents involved in this study. Even the one woman who was not a parent was clear that she wanted to encourage the youth of her community to remain in school and plan for a career-focused future. This sentiment echoed that of the literature reviewed (Benzanson, et al., 2007; Fouad et al., 2003; Marshall, 2002). “There has been increasing recognition of the role of relationships to women’s career decisions and career identity development” (Lalande, Crozier, & Davey, 2000, p. 193), such that welcoming partners and other family members in the career planning process is seen as advantageous. Considering women’s relationships, family, community, and related roles and responsibilities when making educational and career development plans is paramount to their success.

Providing culturally appropriate and respectful counselling can be a challenge—adding the complexity of career and life planning can be an even greater challenge (Arthur & McMahon, 2005). In part, this can be attributed to the demands of this kind of service and the vast amount of information that must be kept current and applicable to meet the needs of the population being served. Krumboltz (1996) concurred and stated that “career counseling is the most complex type of counseling” (p. 59). Providing career development assistance with women from a culturally diverse population has even greater challenges (Betz, 2006). Keeping abreast of the many factors that influence their daily lives—the intricate web of the numerous roles, responsibilities, and relationships—can often be overlooked or understated by many of the current career development models (Fouad et al., 2003). This can be said to be true for many Aboriginal women particularly for those individuals who reside in remote communities or on reserves (McCloskey & Mintz, 2006). To further complicate the idea of addressing these multiple barriers is the recognition of how unfamiliar the entire premise of career and career planning is for this group (Peavy, 1998). Additionally, planning often requires the individual to leave their community and travel quite a distance to gain access to the needed educational and training programs, causing additional stress and strain—especially for those who have had little exposure to the world outside their community (Peavy, 1998). Considering the added

responsibility of being a young single mother, which many Aboriginal women are, these challenges often make the notion of career seem far too illusive and out of their reach (McCloskey & Mintz, 2006).

The women of this study echoed the findings of the literature reviewed above. They spoke of not having access to early career planning, appropriate role models, varied employment opportunities, and agreed that being single parents certainly added to their initial lack of career focus. Many did have to leave their home communities to rectify these deficits, which often delayed the ability to do so. None of the women of this study spoke of receiving any career or educational counselling prior to attending Mount Royal University, which implores the question: Were services not available or was it possible that the task of providing such services was beyond the scope of well-intentioned practitioners that may have attempted to help? Career planning was an integral part of the AEP and had a demonstrated positive effect on each of these women, as each had a career focus. It is hoped that this study will provide some insight on how to better meet the educational and career needs of other Aboriginal women.

5. Summary

It was abundantly clear, from this study that the educational experiences of these women *have* influenced their career planning and personal development. The collective of their stories offers rich evidence of personal growth and a sense of *reclaiming* education as a tool for health, wellness, and hope for the future. Their earlier stories of education were riddled with negative experiences—be they of racism, abuse, poverty, lack of appropriate role models, or an early introduction to the responsibilities of being a parent. Frequently these were cited as the reasons for their early departure from high school and as contributing to a sense of hopelessness, reduced sense of worth, or ability. Often these same reasons kept them from formulating any form of plans for the future—educational or career focused. All of the women spoke of not receiving any form of career or educational planning or encouragement in their earlier stories. Each of them came to the realization that they wanted to change the circumstances of their lives—to *reframe* those earlier experiences—and overcome the negative effects of the barriers they faced. Often this required them to leave abusive partners, or communities that offered few supports or opportunities for growth so that they might begin to *rewrite* their earlier stories. The new focus of their stories became finding ways to provide a better life for themselves and their children—education was identified as the *tool* by which this could be achieved. Returning to school required a number of supports, the first of which was funding. For some this was an easy process, for others, a difficult one; however once funding support was received, the remaining supports could be pursued, and their educational experience could resume.

Each of these women began their new experience of education through a transition program, the Aboriginal Education Program, more commonly known as the AEP. It was through their new experiences in this program that they began to rebuild their sense of esteem and efficacy. The AEP assisted them to transition to the culture of academia without losing their own cultural identity, and to develop meaningful career goals—important characteristics for successful completion of an educational goal. To achieve the goals, they began to utilize the numerous support services available on campus, as this achievement became the focus of their *new* stories.

In the process of rewriting their stories and beginning a new narrative, each of these women has overcome many of their earlier barriers through assistance from culturally competent and caring professionals and faculty that they have built relationships and rapport with—considerations the women identified as being paramount to their success as students. As a result of these new experiences, all earned strong grade point averages and developed firm career and life plans for the future—factors identified as missing for those women who had previous, unsuccessful attempts at post-secondary. All felt that they were in much healthier places in their lives, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

All of these women have shared the insights they have gained as a result of their new experiences of education and their personal growth. These insights have resulted in the recognition of the differences between an Aboriginal way of teaching and learning and that of more conventional academic programs. Through their stories they shared the ways in which they were able to navigate these differences—to become fluently bi-cultural—so that could be successful in academia without losing their Aboriginal identities. These included maintaining cultural practices, close contact with family and community, as well as approaching academic learning in the same ways they have cultural teachings—by building relationships, relating to stories, and through opportunities to practice their learning. Sharing these insights with us provides the wisdom of their *experiences* so that we, as well as others, might learn.

This sharing reflects the main theme of their stories for the future—*hope*—hope for a future that is brighter, more independent, and career focused, and all see education as the key to that future. They want this future for themselves, their families, communities, and Aboriginal people as a whole.

Although not so long ago in Canadian history, education was used as a weapon of oppression for Aboriginal people, more recently, it has been heralded as the road to a better future. For the women of this study, the devastating effects of the oppressive history were felt, directly or indirectly, by all. Each of them was adamant about not allowing the story of that history to continue to be *their* story of education. There was consensus that education is the vehicle that could provide a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities. It is their expressed hope that sharing their stories to a broader audience helps to affirm the positive use of education for others as well. Each woman in this study asserted—definitively—that she was interrupting history and was *rewriting HerStory and reclaiming education as a tool for personal and community, health and well-being*.

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